

Woodlawn
U. S. Rt. 360, S.
Paul's Crossroads
Essex County
Virginia

HABS No. VA-991

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

WOODLAWN

HABS No. VA-991

Location U. S. Rt. 360, S. of Paul's Crossroads, Essex County, Virginia

Present Ownership

Robert F. and Riston C. Hutchinson, Tappahannock, Virginia

Dating

Although documentary evidence for a construction date is lacking, the house provides stylistic indications of date. The American-bond brickwork and stepped chimney shoulders imply a post-circa 1790 date, as does the original use of machine-cut nails. Eighteenth century style paneled doors are found in prominent locations, but the form continued later, and the doors are hung with nineteenth century butt hinges. The strongest indication of date is provided by the apparently original interior trim (see further discussion of dating under Interior Details). A construction date of circa 1830 is proposed, based on this evidence.

HISTORICAL DATA

The earliest description of the property by its present name occurs in a detailed division of the estate of George Hill, in June, 1856. In that document, reference is made to:

... a tract of land called 'Wood Lawn' situated also in Essex County ... and which is bounded by the said 'Spring Farm' ... and by the said public Stage Road between Richmond and Tappahannock, which said tract is supposed to contain three hundred and fifty-one acres and which was conveyed to the said George Hill in his lifetime in two separate parcels, one of the said parcels having been conveyed to the said Hill by Austin M. Tribble, Trustee by deed bearing date on the first day of August, 1846 and the other by Washington H. Purkins, by deed bearing date on the ____ day of ____, both of which deeds are of record in Essex County Court ...¹

In the description of how the estate was to be divided between his two children, Hill notes that the tract known as Wood Lawn "embraced and includes all the land heretofore known as 'Dunns' ..."²

An investigation of the two transactions noted in George Hill's will shows that Washington Purkins sold 122 acres of land to Hill for \$520.62 1/2.

... it being the tract of land whereof William Dunn died seized and possessed and which was sold by virtue of a decree of Essex Court in the year 1832 and which was purchased by Purkins ...³

Unfortunately no description or inventory of the property is included, and a search for an earlier deed by which Dunn acquired the land was inconclusive.

The second parcel was bought by Hill in August, 1846.⁴ The transaction is somewhat complicated, as Austin Tribble offered the land for sale in 1844 and it was purchased by one Richard F.S. Cauthorn, who paid \$1,605.00 for 204 acres. Apparently Cauthorn was unable to pay Tribble, and in 1846 Hill paid Tribble \$1,605.00 and received the land from Cauthorn. No description is included of the property other than that it adjoined the lands of George Hill (presumably the 122 acre parcel bought in 1833). A search for the transaction by which Austin Tribble acquired the land was also unsuccessful, and so in the absence of descriptions of either property, it is impossible to determine on which tract the present house stood.

When Hill's estate was divided in 1856, Wood Lawn was divided, and the house and two hundred and forty-three acres went to Hill's son, Albert Hill.⁵ He in turn sold the property in January, 1857 to Richard Atkins for \$3,000.⁶ Atkins died about 1860 and in 1868 Wood Lawn was sold to settle Atkin's estate. The purchaser was Adolphus Norris, who bought the land "for the benefit of" his widowed mother, his sister, Atway P. Norris, and himself.⁷ The mother apparently died soon thereafter, for in 1870 we find that the land has been divided between Adolphus and his sister, Atway, with

Atway receiving the house and an indeterminate amount of the land. This partition of the land was agreed to between the two parties, but was never properly recorded in Court records. The result was a lawsuit in 1968 to determine proper distribution of the entire tract among Adolphus' and Atway's descendants.⁸

Atway P. Norris married Samuel Tribble, and the property remained in the Tribble family until 1974, when it was sold to Riston C. Hutchinson and Robert F. Hutchinson to settle the estate of Samuel's son, Robert Lee Tribble, the sole owner of the house and remaining 89 acres.⁹

Robert Tribble had occupied the house with Atway Drusilla Tribble and two other sisters. The family farmed the property, trapped, and sold bamboo fishing poles in the county. The Tribbles' traditional life style is reflected in the lack of modern alterations to the house. Wood and coal stoves were used for heating, and electricity and plumbing were not installed. Plans have been labeled according to these last occupants' use of the rooms, as described by their neighbors.

ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The builders of Woodlawn called on some currently popular ideas as well as a tradition of English vernacular-based architectural forms to create the small house. The double-sloped gambrel roof is first known in Virginia in the second quarter of the eighteenth century.¹⁰ Derived from southeastern English and probably originally Dutch prototypes,¹¹ the roof form was widely utilized in the Chesapeake Bay region well into the first half of the nineteenth century.¹²

The late eighteenth century also saw the popularization in the Eastern United States of a house plan derived from the Georgian double-pile center-stair-hall house. The new plan retained the two-room depth, but placed the two rooms to only one side of the stair hall.¹³ This "two-thirds Georgian" house was occasionally utilized in conjunction with the gambrel roof, thus allowing room for repetition of the plan on the second floor.¹⁴

One plan feature of England's sixteenth and seventeenth century Great Rebuilding was the outshut, rear space covered by a lean-to roof.¹⁵ Service rooms were often relegated to this new space. The form was utilized in America for the familiar New England saltbox house. The Chesapeake region also adopted the outshut or lean-to, and in one fashion it was used to accomodate a full Georgian plan.¹⁶

For social and construction reasons, each floor of Woodlawn has a different plan. The main floor is two-thirds Georgian in form, although its inattention to strict popular prototypes is seen in the two levels of the floor, and in the unequal dimensions of the rooms. The plan was adopted simply because it was known, and it accommodated the owners' needs for living space and privacy. The privacy afforded by a separate stair passage was not necessary in the basement, so there the plan consisted of two rooms opening into each other. The lean-to form did not facilitate two-room depth on the second floor, and there rooms were awkwardly fitted into a confined space.

Simple but currently stylish interior details were added to complete the builders' or owners' concept of an adequate house. Thus a parlor mantel circuitously derived from the interior designs of Robert Adam became a fixture in a house with a roof that draws its origins from Dutch vernacular buildings. A relatively new plan type with some social pretensions was utilized, but it was placed behind a facade whose doors and windows were informally placed where tradition and necessity indicated. This blending of folk and popular features in a small pre-industrial American house is not unexpected; it is the normal solution.

SUMMARY DESCRIPTION

Woodlawn is a two-bay gambrel-roof frame house. A rear lean-to facilitates a two-room deep plan on the first and basement floors. Inattention to visual balance is apparent in the irregular placement of fenestration. The frame portion of the building appears to have been built in one period on the extended foundations of an earlier structure. Slight alterations have occurred, but Woodlawn retains its plan and most early details.

Exterior:

Foundations - The foundations, all laid in three-course American bond, date from two periods (Sheet 2). The thicker rear foundation may have survived from an earlier structure, and the more carefully constructed front walls and chimneys date from construction of the house. There is no visible evidence that the rear of the frame structure is not contemporary with the rest of the upper building. As the earlier foundation is laid in rough American-bond brickwork, which seldom dates prior to circa 1800 in Virginia, it apparently pre-dated the house construction by not more than thirty years.

Exterior (continued)

Structural System - Framing consists of post and stud walls, with down braces and L-section corner posts. Early beaded weatherboarding survives on the front wall and under the basement entrance pent on the southwest end; all other siding has been replaced.

Horizontal framing is only visible in the ceiling of the rear basement room. There a longitudinal summer beam is placed off-center, and joists run from it to the wall sills. The two groups of joists vary in placement. The system is confused; a summer beam is not necessary for so short a span -- this confusion appears to indicate reused timbers.

Chimneys - Two exterior chimneys are placed at the southwest end, the larger forward one providing fireplaces for three floors and the rear one serving only the first floor. Both chimneys are constructed of three-course American-bond brickwork, with stepped shoulders and single corbel course caps.

Porch and basement entrance - Although the framing of the front porch is recent, its L-plan brick piers appear contemporary with the second construction period of the foundation. A roof support nailed to the facade is all that remains of the porch superstructure. Two slots in the post reveal a railing location.

Exterior (continued)

The frame portion of the southwest wall basement entrance is probably twentieth century, but it is in the original position of the basement entrance location.

Closet projections - A cantilevered closet with pent roof projects from the south corner of the first floor rear room (Sheets 3 and 6). The wall framing of this closet is exposed on the interior. The front basement room is served by a shelved closet, whose pent roof has been removed (Sheets 2 and 6).

Doors - The primary entrance is the six-paneled front door; the opposing rear door and basement door are constructed of vertical boards with rear horizontal battens (Sheets 11 and 12).

Windows - Window location and size has remained unaltered except on the northeast wall, where first and second floor window sizes have been changed. All sash has been recently renewed, but the original sash was stored at the house. An examination reveals that, although new panes and muntins are of slightly different proportions, they have the same relationships as the early sash. The surviving early sash could be assigned to their proper windows, and so they were drawn in place. The number of panes in each window varies from three over three in the basement to eight over twelve on the first floor facade (Sheet 10). Muntins are of the eighteenth century type, with full quarter rounds separated by a fillet.

Exterior (continued)

Roof - The upper pitch of the gambrel roof is continued down on the rear to form a lean-to or outshut. Shallow dormers with shed roofs pierce the front roof below its break. The facade cornice survives; its section consists of an ovolo and cavetto with fillets (Sheet 13).

The roof employs a common rafter system, and rafters of the long rear slope consist of two timbers crudely nailed together approximately two-thirds of the way down from the ridge. This connection is visible in the second floor crawl space. rafter ends are lapped and pegged at the ridge. Second floor ceiling joists form the tie beams.

Interior:

Plans - The three floors differ significantly in plan (Sheets 2, 3, and 4). Both the basement and the first floor are two rooms deep, but the northeast end of the first floor is partitioned to form a stair passage linking the two opposed exterior doors. Entrance between the two basement rooms is direct, rather than by a passage.

The second floor plan consists of a small room abutting the head of the stair, and a large chamber with rear crawl space accessible from that room. The attic is reached by a trap door in the smaller second floor room. There was once access between the two second floor rooms, but the doorway has been plastered over.

Interior (continued)

Stairways - The two stairs rise on the northeast wall. Both are enclosed by plastered walls. At the top of the stair in the second floor passage is a horizontal railing with square balusters and newel. The railing is constructed of reused parts and was originally set in a downward diagonal position, perhaps in another building. This is evident from an examination of the upper end of the handrail, which protrudes through the passage wall into the rear crawl space.

Flooring - Floor boards are of random width, placed parallel to the facade.

Wall and Ceiling Finish - Surface finish indicates relative importance assigned to rooms by the builders. First and second floor walls and ceilings are plastered; studs and rafters are only exposed in the attic and second floor crawl space. Brick basement walls are whitewashed, with the ceiling framing exposed in the rear room and covered with tongue and groove boards in the front room.

Doors - The choice of doors again indicates the desire for artfully finished features in areas considered to be of most social importance. With the exception of a batten door to the second floor crawl space, all first and second floor interior doors are of the five-panel variety, with raised panels and quarter-round moldings. Many show evidence of

Interior (continued)

having been moved and cut down, so it is possible they are reused from another building. In the basement, batten doors were seen as sufficient to enclose utilitarian and less social activities. All doors are hung on butt hinges except the batten door between the basement rooms, which is sufficiently heavy to require strap hinges set on pintels.

Interior trim - The interior trim is a key to dating the construction of the house. Although the paneled doors are of eighteenth century construction type, door and window frames conform to later Federal era molding styles (Sheet 10). The standard Woodlawn architrave trim consists of a small cavetto and torus edging a beaded frame.

The mantel in the front first floor room (Photographs 11 and 12) follows the primary Federal mantel prototype, the form popular in the United States at the end of the eighteenth century and through the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

The fireplace surround consists of reeded pilasters supporting an entablature derived, three-part lintel. The cornice develops outward into a shelf and the lintel breaks forward to form panels at the center and above the pilasters.

The mantel of the rear first floor room has no supporting pilasters; it consists of a beaded panel with a molded shelf which is a simplified version of that in the front room. The two mantels are Federal era in form, but their moldings include angular sections that are distinctly Greek Revival

in character (Sheet 13, Sections B-B and C-C).

The rear mantel has been removed from the wall, allowing examination of its nailing blocks. (Photograph 10). Lack of evidence for earlier work there indicates that this, and probably the front room mantel, are original to the house.

As the angular Greek moldings would not be expected to appear until the 1830's and their use in combination with strong Federal forms would probably not occur long after then, a date of circa 1830 can be postulated.

The northeast wall of the first floor passage carries a series of garment pegs set into a wooden strip beaded at both edges. The pegs are placed between the stair and facade wall, and are interrupted by the window.

HARDWARE

A lock on the large interior basement door has recently been removed. Wooden L-shaped bar rests remain on the front and exterior basement door frames. (Sheet 12).

String-operated latches occur on paneled and batten doors, both interior and exterior (Sheet 11 and Photographs 14 and 15). The latches vary in quality of craftsmanship. Some utilize sawn and carved rests and keepers, while others are composed of wooden strips nailed together. Arnold Motley remembers string latches being made in the Rexburg vicinity of central Essex County in the second decade of the present century. He relates the two methods of manufacture noted above, describing the latter as inferior. Mr. Motley recalls that rawhide was generally preferred to string, and that the string or thong was pulled in and exterior doors barred at night.¹⁷

SITE AND SURROUNDINGS

Setting - Oriented to the northwest, the house faces State Highway 360 at Paul's Crossroads (Sheet 1). It is surrounded by a small grove of locust trees and a large cultivated field. Sloping topography and a small creek form a boundary behind the house.

Outbuildings - The one surviving outbuilding is a 10' x 12' 6" frame structure located directly behind the house (Photographs 1 and 16). Dating, like the house, to the first half of the nineteenth century, it is constructed of posts and studs with down braces. Its brick foundation has been largely replaced with cedar posts and the roof structure has been rebuilt. Early beaded siding survives on the front and back walls. The original use is not known, but the building has recently been used for curing meat. An addition, probably dating to the twentieth century, is a lean-to chicken house with board roofing (Photograph 17).

PROJECT INFORMATION

This documentation was produced by students at the School of Architecture at the University of Virginia, under the direction of K. Edward Lay, Assistant Dean, in 1976. It was donated to the Historic American Buildings Survey. The documentation was not produced under HABS supervision, nor has the data been edited by HABS staff.

FOOTNOTES

1. Deedbook 51, p. 1. Early documents refer to the tract as Wood Lawn. This was eventually combined to one word.
2. IBID
3. Deedbook 44, p. 146
4. Deedbook 49, p. 310
5. Deedbook 51, p. 2
6. Deedbook 51, p. 298
7. See Deedbook 105/731 (May 23, 1968) for settlement of a suit arising out of the controversy over how Adolphus Norris and his sister Atway Norris Tribble divided Woodlawn. This document includes a summary of all major transactions beginning with Atkin's death.
8. IBID
9. Deedbook 123, p. 607
10. Paul E. Buchanan, "The Eighteenth-Century Frame Houses of Tidewater Virginia," Building Early America, Charles E. Peterson, ed. Radnor, Pennsylvania: Chilton Book Company, 1976, p. 57.
11. For example, M.W. Barley, The House and Home, London: Studio Vista, 1963, p. 114.
12. For example, Woman's Club of Essex County, Old Homes of Essex County, Richmond: Williams Printing Company. Sadie Scott Kellam and V. Hope Kellam, Old Houses in Princess Anne, Virginia, Portsmouth: Printcraft Press, 1950. Maryland Historical Trust, Historic Sites Inventory, Volumes I and II, Annapolis, Maryland.

FOOTNOTES (continued)

13. Henry Glassie, "Eighteenth-Century Cultural Process in Delaware Valley Folk Building," Winterthur Portfolio 7, Ian M.G. Quimby, ed. Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1972, pp. 37-38.
14. Marcus Whiffen, The Eighteenth-Century Houses of Williamsburg. Williamsburg, Virginia: Colonial Williamsburg, 1960, pp. 134-137.
15. R.W. Brunskill, Illustrated Handbook of Vernacular Architecture. New York: Universe Books, 1971, p. 109.
16. Bernard L. Herman and David G. Orr, "Pear Valley et al: an Excursion into the Analysis of Southern Vernacular Architecture," Southern Folklore Quarterly, v. 39, no. 4 (December, 1975), pp. 311, 323, and 325-326.
17. Arnold Motley, Clerk of Essex County, interview, Tappahannock, May 7, 1976.